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C O N F I D E N T I A L HAVANA 000512

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SUBJECT: BRITISH EMBASSY SEEKS TO BUILD CUBAN CIVIL SOCIETY

REF: HAVANA 356

Classified By: COM Jonathan Farrar for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: In regard to civil society, the British Embassy in Cuba is focused on building capacity and providing Cubans with greater access to uncensored information. Although they are currently doing very little in this area, their stated goal lines up well with past and future USINT programs and could allow for better coordination with the British and other European colleagues. END SUMMARY.

No Independence

¶2. (C) On August 11, poloffs met with the British DCM, Caitlin Jones, and poloff, Chris Stimpson. Stimpson noted that the Government of Cuba (GOC) maintains a monopoly on the provision of social services and routinely denies applications for NGO status for organizations that might be seen as competitors. As a result, he indicated that he knows of only one relatively independent NGO in Cuba that provides anything akin to social services, the Centro Cristiano de Reflexion y Dialogo (CCRD). He said the CCRD has been sustainable, manages a kind of food cooperative, provides computer courses, and is generally well tied into its community. Although some churches and other organizations provide computer training or other forms of local assistance, they maintain this work at a very low level to avoid government attention.

Hope to Do More

¶3. (C) Jones and Stimpson said Her Majesty's Government (HMG) is primarily interested in providing Cubans with greater access to uncensored information and in building civil society capacity. They currently have little activity in these areas, but are considering expansion. The British Embassy currently receives some copies of The Economist (in English), which they distribute. They're hoping to begin distributing more publications. At their request, we provided information about the materials distributed by USINT. The British Embassy has been looking into distance learning programs, particularly training courses for civil society. The programs identified so far are internet-based

and/or cost prohibitive, and they've had difficulties finding courses in Spanish. They're looking for something easy in Spanish that they can distribute on a CD. They balked when asked if they have any plans to offer public Internet access through their Embassy or the British Council, citing concerns about space and potential damage to their relationship with the GOC (reftel).

A Common Focus

14. (C) The British Embassy is one of the few missions in Cuba that regularly meets with civil society and dissidents. HMG's desire to build civil society dovetails nicely with USINT's ongoing support for independent libraries, human rights groups, independent journalists, and civil society at large. In addition to our previous and ongoing activities, USINT started distributing this month a technology toolkit for computer users. Packaged on flash disks, memory cards, and DVD-Roms, the toolkit provides about 1 gigabyte of free software for blogging, word processing, maximizing internet time, protecting information, and photo and video editing. By the end of 2009, we will also open a third internet center with up to 15 computers devoted to a distance learning program newly offered to Cubans. In planning our activities, we will look for opportunities to coordinate and multiply the efforts of our diplomatic colleagues in order to best support and impact Cuban civil society.
FARRAR